



THE NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Reviewing Stand

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Watch Your Language

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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Watch Your Language

MR. BUCHANAN: Do you think it is important to watch your language?

MR. BARNHART: That's like asking, "Do you think it's important to watch your bread and butter?" The answer is obviously and emphatically, "Yes!"

MR. WOLSELEY: You're quite right, of course, Mr. Barnhart, about all that, but I would like to add something. I think it is important to watch our language because we all want to be understood. If we don't watch our language, we may not say what we mean or we may not mean what we say.

MR. WIRTH: You gentlemen approach language from the radio or journalism field. For me language is the manifestation of our social, economic and intellectual environment. It is the evidence of the books we read, the company we keep and the thoughts we harbor. It is the means by which we understand others and by which others understand us.

* * *

Language Is Confusing

MR. BUCHANAN: Most of us have heard at some time or other that the word democracy comes from the Greek word, *demos*, which means *the people*. And we may have been told that *aggravate* means to heighten or increase and that we shouldn't say, "You aggravate me."

We certainly know a southern or Boston accent when we hear one.

Somewhere along the line a teacher or two has told us to say, "It is *I*," or "If *I were* a millionaire," or "He doesn't like me."

We may even be careful to say *secre'tive* instead of *se'cretive* and *dif-theria* instead of *dip-theria*. We may even argue about *address'* and *ad'dress* or *ee-ther* and *eye-ther*.

But what does it all mean? How im-

portant is proper language? And, after all, what is *proper* language?

Now, Mr. Barnhart, you speak of the importance of language in radio. That is obvious. But what about those who never appear on the radio? Is language less important to them, then?

MR. BARNHART: The reason language is important to those who appear on the radio is because of the listeners. Our primary problem in radio is communication of ideas, thoughts, feelings, emotions. And it is important to us who speak because those who listen need to understand what we are trying to say. They need to go along with us 100%. Therefore, effective language is also important to them.

MR. BUCHANAN: I suppose it is equally important, Mr. Wolseley, for those who read newspapers and magazines so they can understand what we say. And you mention "meaning what we say." How can we use our language best to accomplish that end?

'Use Simple, Exact Words'

MR. WOLSELEY: My special interest in communications is as a teacher of journalism. The press everyone admits—I don't think we would argue about that—is a strong educational and cultural force. I don't mean to say it is necessarily a good force all the time, but it is an educational, cultural force. If it fails as a social tool, that is, if a speaker's thought is not transferred accurately to the minds of the readers, we might say the press has failed in its influence. To meet its obligations it seems that the press must use simple and exact words and use mainly short and simple sentences.

MR. BUCHANAN: Mr. Wirth, you, on the other hand, have a somewhat different view. How did the language

that you are speaking about grow and develop to what we know today?

MR. WIRTH: Language developed and grew with the development and the growth of man. Man is a social being. In order to become a social being he had to have communication. Language is the means of communication. It grows; it is a living organism. It develops and evolves and cannot stand a strait jacket.

MR. BUCHANAN: Now, you speak of language growing. What was its original beginning? We must have had certain sounds which were put together in the first spoken language used.

MR. WIRTH: Of course there are interesting theories about the growth and development, the origin of language—the pow-wow theory, the vowel theory and all kinds of theory.

I think nobody knows how language actually grew. We know, perhaps, how language developed, but about the actual growth, the origin, there are very many different theories.

Types of Language

MR. BUCHANAN: What of language, then, today? What types of language do we have, Mr. Barnhart? Can you classify them into various groups?

MR. BARNHART: From one angle we can think of the spoken language as contrasted with the written language. And those of us who work in the radio field have the problem of starting with spoken language in script form. We must translate that into the spoken word. And we are very dependent upon the freight that is carried by single words as they are spoken, lacking as we do in radio the aid to speech that comes from seeing people while they are talking, the gesture, the facial expression.

MR. WOLSELEY: Mr. Barnhart, do you think it is true that radio has to be as concerned about simple communication with its public as is the press? I've said that newspapers and magazines of mass circulation can't assume

elaborate vocabularies. Do radio people have that same point of view?

MR. BARNHART: Obviously we have the same problem of vocabulary that you face in the newspaper. After all, radio is a one-dimensional medium of communication also. You have the eye functioning for the reader; you have the ear functioning for the listener. It is a one-dimensional phase of speech.

MR. BUCHANAN: Even in a two-dimensional phase, however, you would still have to watch the limits of your vocabulary in relation to your audience.

MR. BARNHART: That's right!

Written and Spoken Word

MR. BUCHANAN: That worries me. Don't you become rather discouraged, Mr. Wirth, when you hear two gentlemen talking about radio and television who emphasize that they must be careful to avoid words not understood by the general public?

MR. WIRTH: Not at all. I think that is quite natural. It is the outcome of the growth of our language.

First of all, we must clearly differentiate the written word from the spoken word. I think in the spoken word we are much freer. Writing still has magic for most of us. If we get a pencil or pen in our hand or sit before our typewriter, we use an entirely different language—much more formalized. When we speak, we express ideas, perhaps not always very clearly, but we get them across.

MR. BUCHANAN: Do you, however, get them across in speech by more than just the word? The gestures that Mr. Barnhart speaks about are lacking in writing.

MR. WIRTH: That is certainly true, but then in writing we have to use the proper word first. If we cannot get the thought through by one word, we have to use more than one word. We must always keep in mind the fact that language is communication; and we must try our utmost to get our

ideas across to those persons to whom or with whom we communicate.

MR. BUCHANAN: What about this business of basic English? I have heard a lot about cutting our language to—what is it? Five hundred or 900 words? Yet you can express anything you wish.

Basic English

MR. BARNHART: I am not sure I can go along with that thesis. I will grant you that there is such a thing as using too large a vocabulary so that you actually defeat your primary purpose of communication—using words that are too big, that are seldom used, that are not commonly known. Words that are on the academic or erudite side may defeat your purpose of communication. But I am not yet convinced that all of man's thought bearing any subtlety of meaning or shading can be carried by a meager vocabulary of 500 words. I have seen too many people with vocabularies of 5,000 or 10,000 words who still were defeated when it came to expressing what they really thought or really felt.

MR. WIRTH: This problem of basic English interests me as a teacher of foreign languages. Basic English is reduced to roots. And I think this expresses the importance, the beauty of English. English is such a rich language because it has taken up words from the entire world. In studies scholars have made statistical compilations which say, for example, that English is one-fifth Germanic origin, three-fifths Greek and Latin derivatives, and the other fifth various sources from Persia to Hindustan.

Naturally the common man does not understand the very erudite words, the technical word from a Greek source, but if he can express his thought in simple terms, then it is wonderful.

MR. WOLSELEY: There is one man, Mr. Wirth, who has come into the American scene in the past five or six years and who seems to have followed your views. He has attempted to do something in a therapeutic sort of way, a

corrective sort of way, for the American language. A man named Rudolf Flesch wrote a book published in 1946 called, *The Art of Plain Talk*. In that book he recommends that we use more personal references in our writing, that we keep our sentences short—17 to 18 words on the average. He has set up a sort of a formula for use of language.

Do you think that has been good or bad for the American language?

MR. WIRTH: I think in language, if we keep in mind that we have an idea to express, we must in some way express this idea. We must not try to show off our learning.

This story illustrates:

A preacher is to be hired. Candidates come and give their sermons. In the village church two prominent peasants sit in the front pew and watch and listen. They come out and they exchange their views. The one says, "This is a wonderful man, a beautiful sermon."

The other says, "I agree. I didn't understand a word he said."

I am quite certain that their conversation was sincere. They thought that he was speaking wonderfully because they didn't understand him, that he was so learned that they could not approach him.

Naturally, that cannot be the criterion in a language for communication. We want to understand what the other fellow says.

'Grain of Salt Needed'

MR. BARNHART: I am interested in the mention of Flesch's book. I found it an interesting, and in many ways, a valuable book, providing you read quite carefully what he says in his introduction. It is a form of warning.

I am reminded of an admonition that was given to me by a college president in my undergraduate days. He once found me reading the preface to the plays of George Bernard Shaw. His only comment was, "I hope you

are reading all those with a grain of salt."

And I am inclined to think we need to read Flesch with a grain of salt. His book is not a cure-all for language difficulties at all. It certainly is a step in the right direction, but the thought that you are going to solve all language problems by buying and reading this book is false.

MR. BUCHANAN: Is his particular view a warning that we should simplify our language? Is that his major thesis?

MR. WOLSELEY: Yes, he says you should keep your sentences to the average of 17 words, minimize the number of syllables in your words, use the simple word whenever possible.

MR. BUCHANAN: And the concrete word, he says, rather than the abstract. The active verb rather than the passive.

MR. WOLSELEY: Use the personal reference wherever possible.

MR. WIRTH: But is the small word, the simple word, always better understood than the complicated word?

MR. WOLSELEY: That depends upon the audience, doesn't it? It depends upon the people to whom you are talking. A group of psychologists might understand a long word more readily than some short ones.

MR. WIRTH: But we have quite a number of long words in our everyday vocabulary.

What About Semantics

MR. BUCHANAN: That's true. What if we use the word, *sesquipedalian*? The word itself is so long it gives a hint of its meaning. "A foot and a half" in length, it ridicules itself.

What about this "semantics business" I hear so much about today—this problem of what a word really means? You brought reference to semantics in mentioning that we may not say what we mean, Mr. Wolseley.

MR. WOLSELEY: Semantics is presented as another cure-all, although I think

we should distinguish between the simple semanticists, the persons who believe in it as a corrective for language, who believe that communication between people can be made easier if we use exact words, and the other group, the general semanticists who believe it can solve all our economic and social problems. That second group is treating semantics as a cure-all. There is a measure of truth in what its members say, but maybe we here should consider the kind of semantics that says: If you use a strange word—strange to your audience—accompany it with a symbol or sign, an explanation of some kind so that the meaning of that word is clear.

The Right Word'

MR. BUCHANAN: Can you illustrate that for us?

MR. WOLSELEY: Perhaps by the word, *semaphore*. If I should use the word, *semaphore*, in talking to a very young person who may not know quite what it means, I should say, "Semaphore is the sign that you see on the railroad line. It indicates that the train has passed or is coming; it is a moving arm."

And then he might know what I meant by *semaphore*.

MR. BUCHANAN: And, of course, with the benefit of gestures you could probably imitate a *semaphore* to put across your point.

It seems to me semantics is important in radio. As we know, Mr. Barnhart, we employ words which are heard in six or seven different sections of the country. Is it possible that one word has a different meaning in different communities?

MR. BARNHART: Not only possible, it is actually true. And we have to watch very carefully for colloquial meanings, provincial meanings. That is true of pronunciation problems as well as the initial word choice. We have to be very careful of the implied meaning that goes along with the basic meaning inherent in a word. A wrong word

choice, a word choice that is only approximately right, very frequently carries with it an implication that is not at all intended.

A student not long ago handed in some continuity containing a phrase in which he called the performer "the friend of the Steinway." Well, that certainly was a presumptuous implication in usage. Steinway pianos got along very well without the friendship of any particular performer.

MR. WOLSELEY: Aren't we getting to a new point? One of us a few moments ago said, "The reason is because . . ." Is it important that we use that extra language? Is it really important that we sometimes say, "The consensus of opinion is . . ." when we are told that *consensus* is enough?

MR. WIRTH: I think it is important. It is important because somebody might not understand *consensus*. He might only feel the meaning in *consensus of opinion*.

As for semantics, I believe one thing is primary law: Define your terms. Or, as Henry James in *The Question of Our Speech* once put it: "All life therefore comes back to the question of our speech, the medium through which we communicate with each other; for all life comes back to the question of our relations with one another."

I believe that human relations can be harmed by mis-statements or misunderstandings.

What Is Right?

MR. WOLSELEY: Don't we, Mr. Wirth, seem to have a contradiction here? Earlier I said that it was necessary to use the exact word. And now we both have been saying that we should be somewhat liberal; that there is importance in being exact; but, on the other hand, we can be free to follow the people; that the people establish the language; that language is a living thing; that the dictionaries are not authoritarian. Isn't there a contradiction in that?

MR. WIRTH: There is a certain con-

tradiction, yes. But only the thinker or the speaker can say, "This is the right word for this idea."

MR. BARNHART: Here we are concerned primarily, it seems to me, not only with what the thinker or the writer or the speaker really means, but with true communication. The speaker or the writer may understand completely, but if he does not succeed in carrying that idea to a listener or a reader, he has failed. In communication we must constantly keep this in mind.

'What Was Said?'

MR. WIRTH: Yes, that is certainly true. I think you have the best example in translation from a foreign tongue. Take classical masterpieces. Take the Homeric poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. You have there one body of literature which has been translated from Greek into English. I think it is easy to enumerate at least 20 translations, several translations within one generation, but here is the text, the Homeric poems, the actual manuscripts. How is it possible to have so many translations in the same tongue? Because we interpret words differently. We don't necessarily translate what the author has said, but what we mean he has said. And I think this translation example can be applied to the study of literature in our own tongue.

MR. WOLSELEY: May I be personal, Mr. Wirth? Although the average person doesn't have access to Homeric sources, he probably has access to a little dictionary he got with a bottle of ink one day or maybe his dog-eared dictionary used in high school days. Shall he turn to that as the final authority? What do you think?

MR. WIRTH: He would not be called upon to translate. Still, he has translations in his own native tongue, and these translations, the various translations differ enormously. This is true not only of literary monuments translated from a foreign tongue into our own native tongue, but it is also true

of literary monuments written in our native tongue. That is, the teacher of literature often tells us, "This is what the poet wanted to say."

MR. BUCHANAN: The interpretation?

MR. WIRTH: The interpretation, yes, and there is, of course communication. I think the poet, the writer said what he had to say.

MR. BUCHANAN: I am concerned about the matter of communication, Mr. Barnhart. Aren't we striking a rather telling blow at the general rules of grammar, spelling and pronunciation if communication is our only thought?

MR. BARNHART: No, because there must be some rules for the game. How would you like to play a football or basketball game where there were no rules? How would you like to run this radio program without any rules, no limitation as to time or to the place where I sit or to how long I talk?

MR. BUCHANAN: It might make my job much simpler.

How Many Words?

MR. BARNHART: I am not quite so sure it would. We must have rules for the game.

Then, I would like to backtrack just one moment to the comment of Mr. Wolseley. You ask, Mr. Wolseley, whether we should choose the exact word or amplify that word with a few well-chosen modifiers. It seems to me that we have two different situations to face.

I find myself using a great many more words when I do not have the exact word at the tip of my tongue, and I suspect that happens with writers as well as with speakers. I think you can put your finger on the nearest possible right word, granting there is no particularly ideal choice word. Then you do not need all these amplifying adjectives.

On the other hand, when the addition of an adjective or qualifying phrase adds new meaning to your basic idea, then certainly you are justified in amplifying your word.

MR. WOLSELEY: Yes, yes, you are quite right.

We still don't seem to resolve the contradiction; that is, after all, we take our language from the people, the people are changing it. Grammatical errors are being accepted into the language, and there is no final authority in printed form. Our dictionaries must be a reflection of what usage has established as the norm; what people say becomes the normal thing. What of the ordinary citizen who doesn't spend his life in libraries or in the professorial air in which we move? What is he to do to settle an argument about some of the points of the day that Mr. Buchanan has mentioned? Can he turn to any printed form, any person?

'Errors Become Law'

MR. WIRTH: Yes, I think he can turn to printed material, to dictionaries. There are innumerable dictionaries, and they are all more or less good. But what is the final authority? The final authority is the people.

A Frenchman, Monsieur Villemain in his *Preface du dictionnaire d'academie*, the dictionary of the French Academy, in 1835 wrote, "Universal suffrage may not always have existed in politics, but it always has existed in language. There, the people are all powerful, infallible, because, sooner or later, their errors become law."

That is certainly true. We imitate others. You have in the English language examples of errors becoming law. I recall one incident in spelling, our word, *delight*. Of course, correctly speaking, etymologically speaking, and from the source there should be no *g-h*. This word has no connection with light. It is a derivative from the French, *deliter*. But since it was pronounced *dee-light* by the English, it sounded like light. So somebody insisted it must be spelled with a *g-h*, and this error became law.

MR. BUCHANAN: What can we say, then, if error becomes law? What is the authority, Mr. Barnhart?

MR. BARNHART: The answer is that error does not become law overnight. I think we have to understand the point of view and the problem that faces the editorial staff of any reputable dictionary. Its members have to do research and study of trends and tendencies and changes. Before they make a change in their recommendation on the pronunciation of a word they have to be sure, first of all, that this change has become widely, extensively adopted and that the new pronunciation will continue. They must be sure the change is not a purely transient pronunciation that is here today and gone tomorrow.

MR. BUCHANAN: How do they know that?

Authorities Are Reliable

MR. BARNHART: They carry on research and study. Have you any idea of the time and money they spend on research concerning a single word before they go to press with a recommendation in a new edition? A great deal!

MR. BUCHANAN: What you are saying is that an individual cannot believe he is right because in his own experience his pronunciation or usage is all he has ever heard?

MR. BARNHART: That is right. The most unreliable argument is one individual's personal experience. Let me give you an example:

Take the word *poliomyelitis* which

has come to be known as the shortened form *polio*. The dictionary gives the pronunciation of *poliomyelitis* as in "polly" not as in "pole." And behind that recommendation is consultation of vast numbers of practicing physicians and people in the medical field.

MR. BUCHANAN: I think, gentlemen, you emphasize the basic purpose of language—to communicate, to convey a message, to say something.

You have clearly pointed out that language varies according to usage, according to the result desired, and according to form. And we certainly know that written and spoken language differ.

If I can summarize your views, proper language, you suggest, becomes proper throughout the years, tempered with the changes or alterations of honest communication.

ANNOUNCER: Thank you, gentlemen.

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MR. BUCHANAN: Next week the Reviewing Stand will bring you a repeat performance . . . repeat in the sense that the subject was discussed last year just about this time. You may remember the intense discussion of four high school students as they expressed their definite opinions on our question . . . *What Do Our Teenagers Think of America's Future?* Next week four teen-agers from differing geographical sections of our country will let us know—and they do usually not hesitate to let us know—their views of our coming years.



Suggested Readings



Compiled by Laura R. Joost, Assistant,
Reference Department, Deering
Library, Northwestern University



- BARNES, DUANE CLAYTON *Word Lore*. New York, Dutton, 1949.
A study of the history and derivation of English words, designed for the general reader.
- BODMER, FREDERICK *The Loom of Language*, ed. and arranged by L. Hogben. New York, Norton, 1944.
Presents the origin, growth, and the present use of language for communication between peoples.
- BROWN, IVOR J. C. *Word in Your Ear, and Just Another Word*. New York, Dutton, 1945.
A witty, learned anthology of words dealing with the origin and mutations of certain words.
- CARNAP, RUDOLF *Introduction to Semantics*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1942.
A beginning volume on semantics as a science of meanings.
- FLESCH, RUDOLF F. *The Art of Plain Talk*. New York, Harper, 1946.
Valuable hints on effective presentation in speech and writing.
- FUNK, CHARLES EARLE *A Hog on Ice, and Other Curious Expressions*. New York, Harper, 1948.
A collection of phrases, selected because of their place in our language, with an account of the alteration of their meanings.
- HAYAKAWA, S. I. *Language in Action*. New York, Harcourt, 1941.
A study of the function of language, its use and misuse.
- JESPERSEN, OTTO *Growth and Structure of the English Language*. 9th ed. rev. Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1943.
- JESPERSEN, OTTO *Language, Its Nature, Development and Origin*. London, Unwin, 1922. Reprint, 1933.
A book on the science of language—its nature, origin and development.
- LEE, IRVING J. *Language Habits and Human Affairs*. New York, Harper, 1941.
For the layman, a book on the use and abuse of words in our everyday speech.
- MENCKEN, HENRY L. *The American Language*. New York, Knopf, 1919. Supplement 1, 1945; Supplement 2, 1948.
A discussion of the diverging streams of English and American speech.
- OGDEN, CHARLES K. and I. A. RICHARDS *Meaning of Meaning*. New York, Harcourt, 1923.
Profitable and entertaining reading for those who wish to address remarks to fellow creatures with the intention of being understood.
- OPDYCKE, JOHN B. *Say What You Mean*. New York, 1944.
Chapters on the study of words, correct usage, and principles governing usage.
- SCHLAUCH, MARGARET *The Gift of Tongues*. New York, Modern Age, 1942.
A survey of linguistics for the layman.

WALPOLE, HUGH R. *Semantics; The Nature of Words and Their Meanings.* New York, Norton, 1941.

An introductory book on the study of the meaning of words.

Atlantic 183:95, April, '49. "Have You a Fire Stick, Please?" F. PACKARD.

Illustrates the point that American English reacts to word coinage with more ease than do other languages.

Clearing House 23:451-6, April, '49. "What's Happening to Our Language?" J. N. HOOK.

Deals with language evolution and some changes now occurring in English. *College English* 10:313-19, March, '49. "Freedom for Critics." J. E. BAKER.

A discussion of semanticists in relation to criticism.

College English 10:389-95, April, '49. "Linguistics and Pedagogy: Need for Conciliation." THOMAS PYLES.

Cites the need for teachers to recognize clarity as the chief end of studying the use of language and that language is constantly being changed by use. *English Journal* 38:95-6, Feb., '49. "What Standards of Usage?"

A discussion concerning the question: "What constitutes a standard of correct usage?"

English Journal 38:22-9, Jan., '49. "Dissenting Opinion on Language Trends." P. C. GUCKER.

Rejects, to a certain extent, the current trend (in the use of language) of considering popular usage as correct usage.

Harper 198:68-74, March, '49. "How Correct Must Correct English Be?" NORMAN LEWIS. Discussion: 198:12, May, '49.

An article which shows how common usage makes correct usage out of former errors in language.

High Points 30:17-27, May, '48. "How and Why Words Change Their Meanings." H. STOCK.

Language V:155-62, 1929. "A Bibliography of American Pronunciation, 1888-1928." HANS KURATH.

A bibliography of books, phonograph records, word lists, and articles in periodicals on American pronunciation.

New Yorker 24:58+, Oct. 23, '48; 108-13, Nov. 6, '48; 112+, Dec. 11, '48; 25:76-82, April 2, '49. "Postscripts to the American Language." H. L. MENCKEN.

Witty accounts of new words and new meanings in American English.

Parents Magazine 24:35+, March, '49. "Dust Off the Dictionary; Help Children Make Friends with Words." C. J. FOSTER.

How to meet the problem of satisfying a child's fascination for words, their use and meaning.

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What Is Happening to Music in America?

Vol. XII, No. 18

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